

Cyberstalking

Every day millions of kids spend time in Internet chat rooms, talking to strangers. But what many children don't realize is that some of the surfers chatting with them may be sexual predators. More than 15 million children currently go online-more than 10 million of them in America. Are they safe? For that matter, are adults safe when they go online? The Internet has become a favorite place for pedophiles to select potential victims while hiding under the anonymous cloak of a chat name. Although there is no universally accepted definition of cyberstalking, the term can be used to refer to the use of the Internet, email, or other electronic communications devices to stalk another person. Stalking generally involves harassing or threatening behavior that an individual engages in repeatedly, such as following a person, appearing at a person's home or place of business, making harassing telephone calls, leaving written messages or objects, or vandalizing a person's property. Most stalking laws require that the perpetrator make a credible threat of violence against the victim; others include threats against the victim's immediate family and still others require only that the alleged stalker's course of conduct constitute an implied threat.

Cyberstalking Facts

- Cyberstalkers feel they are anonymous and can get away with anything
- When caught, most cyberstalkers say they didn't mean to do it, or for it to go so far
- Most instances are not related to romances gone sour; a majority of the cases are stranger-to stranger
- Over 20,000 cases of cyberstalking are being reported each year
- Over 90% of victims are women
- It is estimated there may be as many as 500,000 online victims each year

Examples of Cyberstalking

- Threatening or harassing email
- "Flaming" - online verbal abuse
- Mass unsolicited email
- Identity Theft
- Leaving improper messages at guest books or newsgroups from the victim
- Initiating directed computer viruses
- Email forgery - sending false or damaging email from the victim - usually to people they know, like co-workers, employees, neighbors, etc.

Why Do Cyberstalkers Stalk?

- **Sexual Harassment** - By far, the most common type of harassment and stalking online is sexual harassment. Online sexual harassment affords a degree of anonymity. The online harasser has no fear of physical retaliation (slap in the face) and does not have to leave the comfort of his home to find, pursue and harass targets.
- **Love Obsession** - Love obsession stalkers often believe that the target of their desires is really in love with them, which means they cannot understand the word "NO." A love obsession can start from an online romance, where one person then halts the romance, and the rejected lover cannot accept the end of the relationship. (In this case, detailed personal information is often shared between the persons involved).
- **Hate/Revenge Vendettas** - Hate vendettas may have nothing to do with sexual harassment at all. There are more male targets in this category. Hate vendettas may begin with an argument or disagreement that escalates out of control. A vendetta may also be waged against someone because of their beliefs.
- **Power Trips/Ego Trips** - The victim is usually selected as a random target by someone they do not know. The motivation of the harassers is to show off their skills to themselves and their friends. They do not have a personal grudge against the victim - they are using the victim to demonstrate their power among their own group.

Comparing Offline (“in real life”) and Online Stalking

Similarities

- The majority of cases involve stalking by former intimates, although stranger stalking occurs in the real world and in cyberspace
- Most victims are women; most stalkers are men
- Stalkers are generally motivated by the desire to control the victim

Differences

- Offline stalking generally requires the perpetrator and the victim to be located in the same geographical area; cyberstalkers can be located anywhere.
- Electronic communication technologies make it much easier for a cyberstalker to encourage third parties to harass and/or threaten a victim (impersonating the victim and posting messages to bulletin boards and in chat rooms, causing viewers of that message to send threatening messages back to the victim).
- Electronic communications technologies also lower the barriers to harassment and threats; a cyberstalker does not need to physically confront the victim.

Prevention Tips

- Do not share personal information (real name, address, phone number, school information, marital status, occupation, income or passwords) in public spaces anywhere online, nor give it to strangers, including in email or chat rooms. Do not use your real name or nickname as your screen name or user ID. Pick a name that is gender-and-age neutral. And do not post personal information as part of any user profiles.
- Some filtering software programs can prevent children from posting or emailing an address, telephone number or credit card number.
- Be extremely cautious about meeting online acquaintances in person. If you choose to meet, do so in a public place and take along a friend.
- Make sure your ISP and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) network have an acceptable use policy that prohibits cyberstalking. If your network fails to respond to your complaints, consider switching to a provider that is more responsive to user complaints.
- If a situation online becomes hostile, log off or surf elsewhere. If a situation places you in fear, contact a local law enforcement agency.

What To Do If You Are Being Cyberstalked

- If you are receiving unwanted contact, make clear to that person that you would like him or her not to contact you again.
- Save all communications for evidence. Do not edit or alter them in any way. Also, keep a record of your contacts with Internet system administrators or law enforcement officials.
- You may want to consider blocking or filtering messages from the harasser. Many email programs such as Eudora and Microsoft Outlook have a filter feature, and software can be easily obtained that will automatically delete emails from a particular email address or contain offensive words. Chat room contact can be blocked as well.
- If harassment continues after you have asked the person to stop, contact the harasser’s Internet Service Provider (ISP). Most ISP’s have clear policies prohibiting the use of their services to abuse another person. Often, an ISP can try to stop the conduct by direct contact with the stalker or by closing their account. If you receive abusive emails, identify the domain (after the “@” sign) and contact that ISP. Most ISP’s have an email address such as abuse@(domain name) or postmaster@(domain name) that can be used for complaints. Visit the ISP web site for information on how to file a complaint.
- Contact your local police department and inform them of the situation in as much detail as possible. In appropriate cases, they may refer the matter to state or federal authorities.